

Lt Gen Kamal Davar (Retd) cautions on

# The US withdrawal from Afghanistan: A strategic blunder in the making



(photo: Reuters)

Thus, it is not surprising that successive US administrations have been looking for an honourable exit, even if the hapless Afghans are left at the mercy of the medieval, regressive, intolerant and, fundamentalist Taliban. What is incomprehensible is the hurry to exit in the next three months. The US Central Command, under whose operational responsibility lies Afghanistan, in a statement on 9 June 2021, conveyed that nearly 50 percent of US troops withdrawal had taken place. However, many eminent Americans associated with Afghan affairs earlier have expressed their anguish with Joe Biden's decision to pull out without improving the security situation in Afghanistan. Former US Ambassador to Kabul, Ryan Crocker, has expressed that "we are not ending the war, we are leaving [the] battle-space to our adversaries." Former Commander-in-Chief of the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) and CIA Chief, Gen David Petraeus, has also expressed his anguish at the sudden announcement of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

With the impending complete withdrawal of the US and other foreign troops from Afghanistan fully in sight by September 2021, the Taliban, meanwhile, in concert with the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK), Al-Qaeda and elements of the Haqqani network have stepped up their violent activities inside Afghanistan. They have no compunction in targeting even women and children, funeral processions, schools, and innocent people. In March, this year, the Taliban murdered three female journalists and a few days back also killed many Afghan mine-clearers in the north-east Baghlan province. ISK claimed responsibility for this act citing their aim of targeting Shiite Hazaras. The Taliban, by conservative estimates, dominate and control the bulk of the Afghan countryside with their span now increasing by the day, whilst the ISK's presence is growing in some of the eastern provinces of Afghanistan. Whether Ashraf Ghani's Afghan National Security Forces will be able to withstand the Pakistani-controlled Taliban's onslaughts can easily be gauged.

**N**otwithstanding being easily the world's most powerful nation since the end of the Second World War, much glory still cannot be ascribed to the US statecraft. In reality, most foreign policy and strategic experts opine that the US has a propensity for strategic blunders. The most pronounced geopolitical lapse, since the end of the Cold War, apart from its futile intervention in Iraq from 2003-2011, is now its decision to exit from the land of the Hindu Kush by 11 September 2021. That past US administrations in the last decade or so have all been wanting to bring a closure to the 'forever wars' is well appreciated, but to exit from a gravely fratricidal, violence-afflicted and impoverished nation, and leaving it in a total mess, hardly brings any credit to the US. On the other hand, such decisions diminish its stature and reputation to address global problems with any cohesive strategy or success.

The newly elected US President, Joe Biden, took some time to enunciate his foreign strategy priorities including the exit from Afghanistan, which is understandable. That a majority of his policies would differ from those adopted by his mercurial predecessor, Donald Trump, was always in the offing. Though Donald Trump in August 2017 had loudly proclaimed that

"US presence in Afghanistan would be determined by conditions, not calendars," Trump's administration later had eagerly speeded up the US negotiations with the belligerent Taliban resulting in the February 2020 peace deal with the group. It is regrettable that the US chose to ignore the democratically elected Government of Afghanistan and President Ashraf Ghani's views during the Taliban negotiations. Most analysts strongly felt that the said negotiations were completely one-sided in favour of the Taliban! Despite the Taliban's assurance, at these negotiations, that they would cease violence-ridden acts inside Afghanistan and maintain no contacts with the Al-Qaeda, the converse has been true, much to the dismay of the Kabul government and the common people of Afghanistan.

## A failed Global War on Terror?

It is apparent that the 20 years of war in Afghanistan has bled the US far more than it could absorb, leaving it financially weary and militarily fatigued. The US-based Brown University, in its well researched 20 years, nearly 175,000 people in Afghanistan including 51,000 terrorists-cum-opposition fighters had lost their lives while over 2,300 US soldiers had been killed. In addition, the war had cost the US nearly US \$2 trillion.